IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

Claim 1 (Currently Amended): A method for producing metallic iron, in which after a mixture including a carbonaceous reducing agent and iron oxide is fed onto a moving hearth of a moving hearth reducing-melting furnace at a first position, and is then heated so that the iron oxide is reduced and melted, metallic iron to be obtained is cooled and is then discharged outside the furnace for recovery at a second position downstream of said first position in the direction of movement of the moving hearth, the method comprising the steps of:

prior to the feed of the mixture, bedding a granular hearth material on the moving hearth for forming a layered renewable hearth which is renewable;

removing part or the entirety of the renewable hearth, which is degraded during operation, and then newly feeding the hearth material for newly forming a renewable hearth at a third position upstream of said first position in the direction of movement of the moving hearth;

leveling the surface of the newly formed hearth at a location upstream of said first position in the direction of movement of the moving hearth and between said third position and said first position; and

subsequently feeding the mixture for producing the metallic iron.

Claim 2 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 1, wherein the degradation comprises solidification of the renewable hearth.

Claim 3 (Currently Amended): A method for producing metallic iron, in which after a mixture including a carbonaceous reducing agent and iron oxide is fed onto a hearth of a

moving hearth reducing-melting furnace at a first position and is then heated so that the iron oxide is reduced and melted, metallic iron to be obtained is cooled and is then discharged at a second position downstream of said first position in the direction of movement of the moving hearth outside the furnace for recovery, the method comprising the steps of:

prior to the feed of the mixture, bedding a hearth material on the hearth for forming a layered renewable hearth which is renewable;

feeding the hearth material on the surface of the renewable hearth which is degraded during operation, at a third position upstream of said first position in the direction of movement of the moving hearth, so as to form a new surface of the hearth;

leveling the new surface of the hearth, at a location upstream of said first position in the direction of movement of the moving hearth and between said third position and said first position; and

subsequently feeding the mixture for producing the metallic iron.

Claim 4 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the hearth material is fed so as to fill a recess formed on the surface of the degraded renewable hearth.

Claim 5 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the leveling comprises moving the fed hearth material in the direction intersecting the moving direction of the moving hearth.

Claim 6 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 5, wherein metallic iron and/or slag remaining after discharge is discharged in the moving direction concomitant with the moving.

Claim 7 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the thickness of the renewable hearth is adjusted.

Claim 8 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein, after the renewable hearth is leveled, the hearth material is further fed so as to complete the renewal prior to the feed of the mixture.

Claim 9 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the hearth material comprises a carbonaceous material.

Claim 10 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the hearth material comprises a high melting point material having corrosion resistance against produced slag.

Claim 11 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 10, wherein the high melting point material comprises an oxide containing alumina and/or magnesia or silicon carbide.

Claim 12 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 10, wherein the hearth material further comprises a carbonaceous material.

Claim 13 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 9, wherein the hearth material further comprises a material which is to be used as a CaO source or an MgO source.

Claim 14 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 9, wherein the hearth material further comprises a sintering promoter.

Claim 15 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the cooling is performed by supplying a coolant or the hearth material.

Claim 16 (Currently Amended): The method according to claim 1, wherein, when the degraded renewable hearth is removed, the renewable hearth is softened and is then removed[[:]].

Claim 17 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein, before the feed of the mixture, an atmosphere-adjusting agent containing a powdered carbonaceous material is bedded on the renewable hearth, which has been renewed, so as to form a layered structure, and subsequently the mixture is fed.

Claim 18 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 17, wherein the atmosphere-adjusting agent comprises a material which is to be used as a CaO source or an MgO source.

Claim 19 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 17, wherein the hearth material is blended in the atmosphere-adjusting agent.

Claim 20 (Currently Amended): The method according to claim 17, wherein ~~THE~~ the atmosphere-adjusting agent is fed in twice or more.

Claim 21 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein a layer containing a powdered carbonaceous material is present between the moving hearth and the renewable hearth or in each of a plurality of layers formed of the renewable hearths.

Claim 22 (Previously Presented): The method according to claim 3, wherein the hearth material is compacted when the surface of the hearth is leveled.